



Birchitis

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As more facts emerge about Robert Welch and his syndrome—let us call it Birchitis—the picture gets a bit clearer. In terms of its outward aim and cloak of anti-Communism it resembles the unlamented McCarthy episode. In terms of organization, semi-secrecy, lack of financial accounting, local vigilantism, and all the flummery of crusading units, it is much closer to the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Councils. In terms of the paraphernalia of a Führer, his contempt for democracy, his decision to make his outfit "monolithic" and "authoritarian," it reminds one more than a little of the early Hitler movement. In terms of its use of front organizations, it has something of the very communism which it affects to fight.

In short, Welch has managed magnificently to pick up and fuse the least attractive elements of some of the least attractive movements of recent years.

One of the gayer aspects of the entire mess is Welch's own insistence now that he has been misunderstood in his valuation of Gen. Eisenhower. Insofar as I can disentangle his earlier and later sentiments, here they are. He says now that he never called Eisenhower a "card-carrying Communist." (Who said he did?)

What he did express, in his privately published book, was his "firm belief that Dwight Eisenhower is a dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy." And the proof for this somewhat cavalier statement? It was based, he wrote, "on an accumulation of detailed evidence so extensive and so palpable that it seems to me to put this conviction beyond any reasonable doubt." Welch now says it is unethical to quote from his privately published book, but it was presumably not unethical for him to circulate it in order to get Birchite recruits.

The mind sags and blurs at this gymnastic merry-go-round of irresponsible mischief and silly self-pitying denial. And one begins to wonder about the mind and personality of the man from whom it comes.

There is also, of course, the accusation that Chief Justice Warren is, judging by his votes, a 92 per cent Communist and must be impeached. There is the "conscious agent" charge against Truman, Milton Eisenhower, both Dulleses. There is the assignment to President (then candidate) Kennedy of the role of "an amoral man (who) can do a tremendous amount of ball-carrying on behalf of Communist aims here in the U. S."

Getting away from personalities, there is the Welch position that the whole fight for civil liberties is a Communist device. There is the flat statement that the big American defense budget, against the external threat of world communism is itself part of the Communist plot, in order to "stampede" the country into the biggest jump ever taken, and perhaps the final jump, right into socialism and then the Communist camp.

Finally there is the self-serving hint that before long the only way by which Americans will be able to save themselves from Communist tyranny will be "by themselves becoming conspirators against established government"—a clear Hitlerite rationalization of the dictatorship to come.

Much and even most of this is the regular lunatic fringe drivel that would-be American Führers have been spouting ever since Hitler came to power, and ever since Roosevelt set in motion a militant effort to relieve democracy from stagnation by an affirmative program of social reform.

What distinguishes this movement is the support it has received from conservative sources that usually stay clear of such messy stuff, and the patina of white-collar respectability it seems to have achieved. Since it does not rely on its own financial backing, the movement spends its money on the propaganda of its

The first victims of Birchitis are likely to be not the Communists but the Republicans. Welch's shock-technique, aimed to show that respectable Republicans are conscious Communist agents, is bound to split the party in agonized inner conflict. The involvement of two California Republicans in the House, Reps. Hiestand and Rousselot, in the Birchitis syndrome is a sign of suffering to come.

But beyond the Republicans the ultimate victim—if the disease of Birchitis were to spread—would be America itself. Think of what the impeachment of Chief Justice Warren, the spokesman for the Supreme Court in the Negro school case, would do to undercut America's position in Africa, Asia, Latin America. Think of what the abandonment of our arms economy, by a kind of unilateral disarmament, would do in leaving the field of battle open to the Russians.

Welch has said that some surprising people are Communists, including those who look least like it. One is seized by the impulse to apply his own tortured logic to Welch himself. Certainly the consequences of his doctrines would be to deliver America, bound hand and foot, to the Grand Design of world communism.